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THE GOLDEN TREE OF THE IBALOIS  
A FOLKTALE

By Cecile Cariño

Long, long ago, in the guise of an old woman, the great god Cabunian visited the members of the Ibaloi tribe in the region now known as Benguet. Claiming that she had seen a divine vision, the old woman instructed the

oldest chieftain to arrange for a *cañao* or feast and to invite all the members of the tribe. The people came, each family bringing hogs and camotes and jars of *tapoy*, or rice-wine. There was music and dancing and the wine flowed freely.

During the height of the feasting, a strange, pregnant woman suddenly appeared who seated herself on a rice-mortar, apparently indifferent to the revelry about her. She had not sat there very long, when a drunken man stumbled against her, throwing her unconscious to the ground. The people did their best to revive her, but soon it was evident that she was dead, and what especially puzzled every one was that no one in the whole tribe recognized her as anyone they had ever seen before.

Cabunian again descended among the people in his guise of an old woman and told them that it had been revealed to her in a vision that it was by the will of their god that the woman died and that her body should be covered by the largest *paljok* or bronze kettle that they had, right in the spot where she had fallen.

After a few days, curiosity got the better of some of the people and they looked under the kettle. To their surprise, they saw that the corpse had disappeared and that a small tree was growing in its place. The people were frightened by this strange thing and thought of the mysterious woman who was still among them. She then revealed that she was a messenger from Cabunian, that she was going to her home in the sun and would return in ten days, and that, in the meantime, they must leave the tree alone and hold a feast around it.

The feast began and, as usual, there was plenty of meat and wine and music. The tree began to grow very rapidly and by the time the ten days were up it had grown to tremendous size and had lifted the kettle up so high above the clouds that it could not be seen anymore.

The people waited for the return of the old woman, but she did not appear. They did not know what to do as the tree continued to increase in size and its great branches spread everywhere. Many of the people thought the miraculous tree spelled a curse to them.

Finally, the top-most branches of the giant tree reached even into the chambers of Cabunian in his heaven, and assuming his former disguise, he went down to the people. They were glad to see the old woman again, and when she commanded Chadigan, the strongest among them, to lay his axe to the tree, he did so, despite the fears of every one.

Glowing splinters flew into the air. The tree seemed to be made of metal. It took a long, long time for even Chadigan, unequalled in strength, to bring down the tree, but finally it fell with a crash that shook all the mountains. There were great landslides, and the rivers swelled and were diverted from their courses. The branches looked like streams of fire in the night and

the leaves like stars.

The terrified people hid in their huts which, miraculously, escaped all harm. After the great commotion had subsided, the people looked out of their hiding places and saw the old woman alone, near the site where the tree had stood. They went out to her and suddenly Cabunian divested himself of the form of the old woman and appeared in his own person. Benignly he gestured to them to come nearer and hear his message.

"My children," he said, "because I placed you at a disadvantage as to your brethren in the lowlands by giving you these bare mountains, I have given you metals, *balitok*, *pilak*, and *kambang*—gold, silver, and copper. Each of your mountains contains a branch of the great tree I gave you, where you may dig your *osok* (mines). The leaves have been thrown into the rivers and there you may pan for them. Exchanging this wealth with the lowlanders for salt and molasses and rice and other things you will need for yourselves and your children, you will never feel want . . ."

It is said that the main trunk of the tree stood at Suyoc, now a mining center, and that the thickest branches fell in Acuphan, better known as Balatoc, now one of the world's richest mines, and also in Itogon, Antamok, and Virac, all regions of mining activity today.

Some aged Igorots claim they know where large veins of gold still lie hidden, but that Cabunian's instructions were to mine the gold only sparingly as the deposits are not inexhaustible and as otherwise there would be nothing left for their children.

Despite the inroads of civilization and the passing of many of their rich mining areas to strangers, the Ibalois still hold *cañaos* in thanksgiving to Cabunian and still sing the praises of the mighty Chadigan who was favored by the god to fell the great golden tree, still the chief source of the wealth and progress of the Baguio region.

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