

The Story of Bantugan

A legend of the Mohammedan tribes or Moros

Before the Spaniards occupied the island of Mindanao, there lived in the valley of the Rio Grande a very strong man, Bantugan, whose father was the brother of the earthquake and thunder.

Now the Sultan of the Island had a beautiful daughter whom Bantugan wished to marry, but the home of the Sultan was far off, and whoever went to carry Bantugan's proposal would have a long and hazardous journey. All the head men consulted together regarding who should be sent, and at last, it was decided that Bantugan's own son, Balatama, was the one to go. Balatama was young, but he was strong and brave, and when the arms of his father were given to him to wear on the long journey, his heart swelled with pride. More than once on the way, however, his courage was tried, and only the thought of his brave father gave him the strength to proceed.

Once he came to a wooden fence that surrounded a stone in the form of a man, and as it was directly in his path, he drew his fighting knife to cut down the fence. Immediately the air became as black as night, and stones rained down as large as houses. This made Balatama cry, but he protected himself with his father's shield and prayed, calling on the winds from the homeland until they came and cleared the air again.

Thereupon, Balatama encountered a great snake on the road, and it inquired about his errand. When told, the snake said:

"You cannot go on, for I am the guard of this road, and no one can pass."

The animal made a move to seize him, but with one stroke of his fighting knife, the boy cut the snake into two pieces, one of which he threw into the sea and the other into the mountains.

After many days the weary lad came to a high rock in the road, which glistened in the sunlight. From the top, he could look down into the city for which he was bound. It was a splendid place with ten harbors. Standing out from the other houses was one of crystal and another of pure gold. Encouraged by this sight, he went on, but though it seemed but a short distance, it was some time before he, at last, stood at the gate of the town.

It was not long after this, however, before Balatama had made known his errand to the Sultan, and that monarch, turning to his courtiers, said: "You, my friends, decide whether or not I shall give the hand of my daughter to Bantugan in marriage."

The courtiers slowly shook their heads and began to offer objections.

Said one, "I do not see how Bantugan can marry the Sultan's daughter because the first gift must be a figure of a man or woman in pure gold."

"Well," said the son of Bantugan, "I am here to learn what you want and to say whether or not it can be given."

Then a second man spoke: "You must give a great yard with a floor of gold, which must be three feet thick."

"All this can be given," answered the boy.

And the sister of the Princess said: "The gifts must be as many as the blades of grass in our city."

"It shall be granted," said Balatama.

"You must give a bridge built of stone to cross the great river," said one.

And another: "A ship of stone you must give, and you must change into gold all the cocoanuts and leaves in the Sultan's grove."

"All this can be done," said Balatama. "My uncles will give all save the statue of gold, and that I shall give myself. But first, I must go to my father's town to secure it."

At this, they were angry and declared that he had made sport of them and that unless he produced the statue at once, they would kill him.

"If I give you the statue now," said he, "there will come dreadful storms, rain, and darkness."

But they only laughed at him and insisted on having the statue, so he reached into his helmet and drew it forth.

Immediately the earth began to quake. A great storm arose, and stones as large as houses rained until the Sultan called to Balatama to put back the statue lest they all be killed.

"You would not believe what I told you," said the boy, "and now I am going to let the storm continue."

But the Sultan begged him and promised that Bantugan might marry his daughter with no other gifts at all save the statue of gold. Balatama put the statue back into his helmet, and the air became calm again, to the great relief of the Sultan and his courtiers. Then Balatama prepared to return home, promising that Bantugan would come in three months for the wedding.

All went well with the boy on the way home until he came to the fence surrounding the stone in the form of a man, and there he was detained and compelled to remain for four months.

Now about this time, a Spanish general heard that Bantugan was preparing to marry the Sultan's daughter, whom he determined to wed himself. A great expedition was prepared, and he, with all his brothers, embarked on his large warship, which was followed by ten thousand other ships. They went to the Sultan's city, and their number was so great that they filled the harbor, frightening the people greatly.

Then the General's brother disembarked and came to the house of the Sultan. He demanded the Princess for the General, saying that if the request were refused, the fleet would destroy the city and all its people. The Sultan and his courtiers were so frightened that they decided to give his daughter to the General, the next full moon being the date set for the wedding.

In the meantime, Bantugan had been preparing everything for the marriage, which he expected to take place at the appointed time. But as the days went by and Balatama did not return, they became alarmed, fearing he was dead. After three months had passed, Bantugan prepared a great expedition to go in search of his son, and the great warship was decorated with flags of gold.

As they came in sight of the Sultan's city, they saw the Spanish fleet in the harbor, and one of his brothers advised Bantugan not to enter until the Spaniards left. They then brought their ship to anchor. But all were disappointed that they could not go farther, and one said, "Why do we not go on? Even if the blades of grass turn into Spaniards, we need not fear." Another said: "Why do we fear? Even if the cannon-balls come like rain, we can always fight." Finally, some wanted to return to their homes, and Bantugan said: "No, let us seek my son. Even though we must enter the harbor where the Spaniards are, let us continue our search." So at his command, the anchors were lifted, and they sailed into the harbor where the Spanish fleet lay.

Now at this very time, the Spanish general and his brother were with the Sultan, intending to call upon the Princess. As the brother talked with one of the sisters of the Princess, they moved toward the window, and looking down, they saw Bantugan's ships entering the harbor. They could not tell whose flags the ships bore. Neither could the Sultan when he was called. Then he sent his brother to bring his father, who was a very old man, to see if he could tell. The father was kept in a little dark room by himself so that he might not get hurt, and the Sultan said to his brother:

"If he is so bent with age that he cannot see, talk, or walk, tickle him in the ribs, and that will make him young again; and, my Brother, carry him here yourself lest one of the slaves should let him fall and he should hurt himself."

So the old man was brought, and when he looked out upon the ships, he saw that the flags were those of the father of Bantugan, who had been a great friend of his in his youth. And he told them that he and Bantugan's father years ago had made a contract that their children and children's children should intermarry, and now since the Sultan had promised his daughter to two people, he foresaw that great trouble would come to the land. Then the Sultan said to the General:

"Here are two claimants to my daughter's hand. Go aboard your ships, and you and Bantugan make war on each other, and the victor shall have my daughter."

So the Spaniards opened fire upon Bantugan, and for three days, the earth was so covered with smoke from the battle that neither could see his enemy. Then the Spanish general said:

"I cannot see Bantugan or the fleet anywhere, so let us go and claim the Princess."

But the Sultan said: "We must wait until the smoke rises to make sure that Bantugan is gone."

When the smoke rose, the ships of Bantugan were apparently unharmed, and the Sultan said:

"Bantugan has surely won, for his fleet is uninjured while yours is badly damaged. You have lost."

"No," said the General, "we will fight it out on dry land."

So they both landed their troops and their cannon, and a great fight took place, and soon the ground was covered with dead bodies. And the Sultan commanded them to stop, as the women and children in the city were being killed by the cannon-balls, but the General said:

"If you give your daughter to Bantugan, we shall fight forever or until we die."

Then the Sultan sent for Bantugan and said:

"We must deceive the Spaniard in order to get him to go away. Let us tell him that neither of you will marry my daughter, and then after he has gone, we shall have the wedding."

Bantugan agreed to this, and the word was sent to the Spaniards that the fighting must cease since many women and children were being killed. So it was agreed between the Spaniard and Bantugan that neither of them should marry the Princess. Then they both sailed away to their homes.

Bantugan soon returned, however, and married the Princess, and on the way back to his home, they found his son and took him with them. For about a week the Spanish general sailed toward his home, and then he, too, turned about to go back, planning to take the Princess by force. When he found that she had already been carried away by Bantugan, his wrath knew no bounds. He destroyed the Sultan, his city, and all its people. And then he sailed away to prepare a great expedition with which he should utterly destroy Bantugan and his country as well.

One morning Bantugan looked out and saw at the mouth of the Rio Grande the enormous fleet of the Spaniards whose numbers were so great that in no direction could the horizon be seen. His heart sank within him, for he knew that he and his country were doomed.

Though he could not hope to win in a fight against such great numbers, he called his headmen together and said:

"My Brothers, the Christian dogs have come to destroy the land. We cannot successfully oppose them, but in the defense of the fatherland, we can die."

So the great warship was again prepared, and all the soldiers of Islam embarked, and then with Bantugan standing at the bow, they sailed forth to meet their fate.

The fighting was fast and furious, but soon the great warship of Bantugan filled with water until, at last, it sank, drawing with it hundreds of the Spanish ships. And then a strange thing happened. At the very spot where Bantugan's warship sank, there arose from the sea a great island which you can see today not far from the mouth of the Rio Grande. It is covered with bongo palms, and deep within its mountains live Bantugan and his warriors. A Moro sailboat passing this island is always scanned by Bantugan's watchers, and if it contains women such as he admires, they are snatched from their seats and carried deep into the heart of the mountain. For this reason, Moro women fear even sailing near the island of Bongos.

When the wife of Bantugan saw that her husband was no more and that his warship had been destroyed, she gathered together the remaining warriors and set forth herself to avenge him. In a few hours, her ship was also sunk, and in the place where it sank, there arose the mountain of Timaco.

On this thickly wooded island are found white monkeys, the servants of the Princess, who still lives in the center of the mountain. On a quiet day high up on the mountainside, one can hear the chanting and singing of the waiting girls of the wife of Bantugan.

Sources:

(1) Philippine Folklore Stories, by Mabel Cook Cole, [1916], at sacred-texts.com

(2) <https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/533570.pdf>

