

The Legend of the Magat River

A long time ago, in a town called Bayombong, in Nueva Vizcaya province, there lived a hunter named Magat. He was young and strong, his eyes were keen, and his hands sure and steady. He was swift as a deer and strong as a bull. Magat was the best hunter in the village, and proud of it.

He lived by himself in a small hut at the edge of the town. But he was a hunter who liked to spend most of his time outdoors. He did not like to be kept in, not by a house, nor by anyone's rules. And he was stubborn.

One day Magat was hunting in the forest. His sharp eyes spotted the tracks of a strange animal. They led to a part of the forest he had never explored, where it was cool and dark. Magat was curious, so he followed the tracks. The soil beneath his feet soon became mossy and full of soft, fallen leaves. Suddenly the tracks disappeared. Magat had to squint to see where he was. The trees were so tall that their branches interlocked overhead. There was hardly any sunlight in this part of the forest.

Then he heard the sound of running water.

Just beyond a clump of grass Magat saw a large stream. On the other side of the stream he saw a large **balete** tree with branches that leaned over the water. And there in the shade of the tree was a maiden, bathing.

Magat hid himself behind the tall grass. He sat very still and silent. The mysterious woman bathed in slow graceful movements. She was the most beautiful woman Magat had ever seen. She had long black hair and her long arms skimmed through the water. Magat felt his heart stir in his chest. He could not take his eyes off her.

Just then his keen eyes detected a sudden movement. It seemed to come from the tree branch hanging just above the woman. Although it was hard to tell in the dark forest, his hunter's instinct told him that danger was near.

Just then a shaft of sunlight streamed through the leaves. The light revealed a python! The huge snake was coiled around the branch, ready to attack the woman.

In one swift movement Magat took his spear and aimed. Hearing a noise in the grass, the young woman looked up to see the hunter for the first time. He was tall and brown and strong, with a spear aimed right at her. She ducked under water at the same time that the python sprang. The spear flew and hit its target. The huge snake fell writhing into the water.

Magat ran splashing across the stream. "Are you hurt?" he called out to the maiden.

The confused woman scrambled quickly onto the riverbank, but when she saw the dead python she stopped. Slowly she turned to stare at Magat. She now understood what had happened and hid her face in her hands. She was ashamed to have suspected him of wanting to hurt her, when really he had saved her life.

Magat took her hands gently and said, "Do not be afraid. I am only a poor hunter."

The maiden looked up at him and smiled. Magat felt his heart overflow with tenderness. They spent the rest of the day together, wandering in the cool forest. By the time the crickets began to sing and the moon had risen in the sky, the hunter had asked the lovely maiden to become his wife.

She agreed.

"I must ask of you only one thing," she said, taking his strong brown hand and putting it to her cheek. "You must promise, in the name of the great god Kabunian, never to look in on me at midday. If you swear it, I will become your wife."

"I will promise you anything," said Magat. "Just be my wife."

"Swear it," she said, urgently.

Magat thought to himself, "I am a hunter. I am always gone at midday. This will be an easy promise to keep." And so he swore never to lay eyes on her in the middle of the day.

Then he laughed and said, "Come, do not be so serious. We will be happy together."

And so they were. She made his home warm and cozy. She filled it with her lovely songs and the good smell of cooking.

One morning Magat was hunting in the forest, following the trail of a huge wild boar. He would have caught it too, but its hide was so tough that the shaft of his spear broke. "What use is a hunter without his spear?" he thought to himself. Not realizing that it was midday, he decided to head for home.

When he arrived at his hut, everything was quiet. It seemed that no one was home. Then Magat saw that the door to his bedroom was closed. Suddenly he remembered his

promise to his wife. He took another spear and left in a hurry so that he wouldn't be tempted to look.

But Magat became curious. He found himself going home at noon the next day, and again the day after. "It is my home after all and she is my wife," he reasoned. "Married people should have no secrets."

And so one midday Magat came home and quietly opened the bedroom door a crack and peeked in. To his horror, he saw a great crocodile lying on his wife's bed. Quickly he ran out to get his spear. Then he crashed into the bedroom, spear poised to strike, but he stopped short.

Lying on his bed was his wife. She appeared sick and pale. When he drew near, she whispered, "You broke your promise, and now I must die. I can no longer live on this earth as your wife. I must leave you."

And as Magat watched in horror, her skin changed color and grew thick. Her arms and legs shortened and her hands and feet became claws. Slimy green scales began to form on her smooth skin. Before his very eyes she had turned into a crocodile. He had broken a promise made in the name of the god Kabunian.

Magat carried the dead crocodile outside and buried it in his yard.

He blamed himself for his wife's death and could not bear to eat or sleep. At last, worn out by sorrow and grief, Magat drowned himself in the very stream where he had met and first rescued his love. As the deep stream engulfed Magat, it grew into a mighty river.

Every year when the rains come, the Magat river rages. The townsfolk say that the hunter's spirit will not rest until he reaches the bones of his wife, buried in his yard at the edge of the town. If the water does not rise to that very spot, the Magat river will never be still.