



Chapter Two

The Story of the Camagon Cane

AFTER supper, Tonio handed to the old man his *buyo* box and his *calikot*. Squatting on the floor, he said,

“Now, Lolo, what about the story of your cane?”

The old man blinked his unseeing eyes as he pounded his *buyo* slowly and began,

“This cane is an heirloom from my grandfather, who was a *cabeza*, rich and powerful in his day. The cane came to his possession in a very strange way. In fact, many people refuse to believe the story, but I know it is true. My grandfather was known as Cabesang Baró. His name was familiar to everybody in the town, but his fame spread to the entire province of Bulacan after his marriage. He married the most beautiful girl of the town who had been courted by the ‘old man of the mound.’

“The young woman, who later became my grandmother, received nightly calls from the Old Man. He came at two o’clock when everybody was sound asleep. He pinched her on the arms and legs to awaken her and repeated to her in a frightful sing-song manner these words:

THE
ADVENTURES
OF A
BEGGAR BOY

•
by Julio Cesar Peña
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“ ‘Maiden fair, my lady,
Leave this hovel of misery
Hie with me, hie with me
Where gold and gems are aplenty.’ ”

“The young woman could do nothing but say a prayer aloud. This act of hers maddened the Old Man and he would retreat muttering: ‘Crazy fool, crazy fool.’ For more than a month the Old Man visited the girl, pinched her, wooed her with the same words chanted in the same fashion, and left murmuring angrily when she said her prayers. The affair went on until she grew very thin from annoyance and lack of sleep. Her arms and legs were covered all over with black-and-blue marks, the convincing evidence of her dreadful experience.

“My grandfather and she had already been betrothed. Their wedding had been set at the opening of the Christmas season, but they had to be married immediately in the hope that the Old Man would cease annoying my grandmother.

“For a whole week after the wedding, the young couple heard nothing from the Old Man. But at two o’clock in the morning of the ninth day, the entire house was awakened by the heavy steps of someone walking through the whole length of the house and proceeding toward the newly-weds’ bedroom. Besides the heavy thud of the feet, the people heard the sound of

a cane descending on the floor with a deafening thump. Presently the screams of my grandfather filled the house. The invisible caller gave him a dozen lashes with the heavy cane and left as he had come, hobbling the house with his cane.

"Fearing the Old Man would call again, my grandfather made a pilgrimage to the mountain where a holy hermit lived. The hermit gave him a white pebble and taught him a short "*oracion*." He was instructed as to what to do when he came to a certain word in the prayer.

"On the ninth day from the first visit, the Old Man came. The sound of his heavy cane filled everybody's heart with fearful expectations. My grandfather left the room and waited for the visitor in the sala. He put the little white pebble in his mouth and started to say his "*oracion*." As he uttered the sentence about the crucifixion, he threw himself upon his unseen enemy and grappled with him for a breathless quarter of an hour. The spectators heard the panting and snorting of the Old Man although they could not see him. My grandfather was growing faint, when he thought of repeating the *oracion*. The moment he said "*ipinako*," his adversary fled, dropping behind him his cane, the cane I now own and use."

"What about the prediction, Lolo?" Tonio asked eagerly.

"I am coming to that, hijo. On the ninth day from the night of my grandfather's encounter with the Old Man, the latter came. He stood at the bedroom door and spoke in a frightful voice:

"'You may have my cane. It is possessed of magic powers. But you and yours shall never enjoy its benefits. For I pronounce upon you and yours the curse of ignorance.'

"That was the last they heard from the Old Man of the mound.

"My grandfather made another pilgrimage to the abode of the holy hermit. This was the holy man's interpretation of the curse of ignorance: Ignorance would prevail in the home of my grandfather and his children's children. All the members of his family would suffer poverty and persecutions because of ignorance. But the person to whom the last surviving member of the family bequeathed the cane would receive untold blessings. My grandfather died in poverty. All his lands and animals passed into the hands of the



Capitan. His children and grandchildren lived and suffered as tenants and laborers. I am the last living member of my family. I fear I'll die a beggar. But you, my boy, you don't belong to our accursed family. Knowledge and riches shall be yours when you come into possession of the cane. But you must conquer ignorance. You must go to school."

"I will work very hard, Lolo, to make your last days comfortable and happy," Tonio declared solemnly.

(Could Tonio overcome the "curse of ignorance?" Read the succeeding installments in the coming issues of *The Young Citizen*.)